and a pale moon is rising

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It was Molly who found the young man sitting with his back to an old oak, with a white duck sleeping on his lap… COMPLETE.

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Introduction

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Molly was the one to find them, though it was Shmendrik the one who had said they should go left rather than right, and the one who said they should rest there. But still, it was Molly who found the young man sitting with his back to an old oak, with a white duck sleeping on his lap.

There was nothing remarkable about them at first sight. It was nothing but a domestic duck, white feathers and clumsy feet as it woke up from its slumber. The young man had a hard expression on his face that spoke of small towns that didn't welcome strangers, and he was tall and thin, his clothes well cared for but not particularly rich, perhaps the youngest son of a farmer, perhaps simply a young man trying to find adventure with a beloved pet by his side.

But second sights were something much more useful than people gave them credit for, and it was something that Shmendrik had learned years ago, when Mother Fortuna had tried to keep a unicorn inside a cage. The way the young man moved was graceful, much more graceful than a simple peasant or a farmer, the way he stood proud and austere, and yet he seemed ever so careful of the water fowl, putting it down gently, trailing his fingers down its head for a moment before he faced them, and half hidden by the bag he had resting over the tree, Shmendrik could see the scabbard of a sword.

And there was something very human in the way the young duck cocked its head to the side, standing behind the man's legs, not quacking at all nor moving away, and she was staring at Molly as she said their hellos, as if it had some troubles understanding her words but it was doing its best to follow the conversation.

Of course, there was also the fact that he had never seen a duck with blue eyes.

"We have plenty of food if you care to join us," Molly offered, because Molly would always offer food and an ear for stories, and for some reason that Shmendrik didn't understand yet, this man with his young face but ancient old eyes seemed to be full of stories, all kind of beginnings and endings brimming inside of him, something that wouldn't have been so strange, perhaps, if not for the fact that Shmendrik got the distant thought that those stories didn't belong to the young man.

The duck quacked just once, and its companion glanced down, his arms still crossed over his chest, but Shmendrik, who was still looking at the duck, didn't miss the way it nodded its head once. Then the man sighed, tired and fond and a thousand more things that told Shmendrik things he couldn't translate just yet, but the duck's companion bent to pick it up, secure in the crook of his arms.

"My name is Fakir," he said finally. "And she's Duck."

Duck ate the bread Molly offered her ravenously, and there was something sweet in Fakir's scold as he watched her eat. He refused the meat, which Molly thought odd, but Shmendrik saw the way the young man was looking at the duck. No-one who befriends an animal that way feels comfortable enough eating other animals, let them be special or not.

"What were you two doing around here, without company even?" Molly asked, smiling at Duck, because even if she wasn't a witch, she was one of the only women who had ever seen a unicorn, and not only that, she had befriended one as well, and she knew Special when she was around it, not the other way around.

"We're going to a wedding," Fakir said, and then amended when Duck quacked. "Prince Siegfried and princess Rue's wedding."

"That's a fairytale alright," Shmendrik said with a brief smile, and Molly nodded. They liked happy endings, whenever they could find one, and it wasn't that hard to find them, if you paid attention.

It was told that after the king's son had disappeared, the king and queen had begged to a kind witch to put a spell over the kingdom, and so the kingdom had slept for over one hundred years, waiting for the prince to appear again.

And a few years ago, suddenly, life had come back to the kingdom, and the beloved prince had come back, hand in hand with a dark haired girl who had come from nowhere. The news had traveled everywhere and anywhere it cared to be listened, about the fair prince with his golden eyes, the prince who had loved everyone and everything the same, suddenly in love with only one young human girl. Molly had said 'good for him' with tears in her voice and Shmendrik had loved her for that, as much as he ever loved her for being herself.

Duck quacked again, bright and cheerful, and then she quacked again at Fakir. Shmendrik thought he saw sadness go through Fakir's face, the shadow of melancholy there but he said, as austere.

"We're aware. We're old friends." Duck quacked again, but this time it was harsher, somehow. Shmendrik looked at her, but Duck was still quacking, flapping its wings at Fakir. 'Tell them', she seemed to be saying, bobbing its head. 'It's okay to tell them'.

If Fakir understood - which was ridiculous even to put in doubt, Shmendrik thought, with the way they both moved around each other it was simply impossible to think that something like quacking versus speaking could be important - he said nothing about it, simply keeping his hands around an old journal, holding tight unto it.

Molly and Shmendrik didn't share a glance, but they both moved at the same time.

"We should sleep," Molly said, moving for their blankets. "I happen to have a very nice cushion around here if you want it, Duck."

"We're not going to that kingdom, but we are going close to it, so we can walk together tomorrow, if you want to," Shmendrik said as he picked up the remains of their dinner.

Fakir looked at him for a moment and then he shrugged, not saying yes and not saying no. When Shmendrik looked at Duck again, she was rolling her eyes the way Molly did when he said something she thought was ridiculously him, something that despite the years he had lived on, Shmendrik had never completely understood, but that said a lot about the young people they had found.

Shmendrik woke up in the middle of the night, with the faint thrumming of music that wasn't there in his ears. The moon was full and silver in the dark velvet of the sky, and their two odd guests weren't there. The bags were, and the sword, but not them.

Shmendrik made sure that Molly was properly covered and then he followed the music that wasn't there, all the way up to the lake where he had washed the pans. And there they were. Or there she was, in the middle of the lake, and there he was, sitting near the shore, his journal open on his lap, but his eyes steady on her.

Perhaps people who had never seen real magic, people who had never seen an unicorn would have said that Duck was simply swimming and that Fakir was simply taking care of her, but Shmendrik knew better. There was poetry in the way she moved her wings, in the way her head cocked to the side. He couldn't see the way her webbed feet moved underneath the water, but he could almost guess their movement. Her reflection on the water was nothing but that of a white duck, but Shmendrik thought he saw more, just for a moment, when the water shone blue, feet and hands and even a girl's smile.

Every so often, Fakir would actually tear his eyes away from her, picking up a pen and quickly scribbling through the pages on his journal, and Shmendrik could almost see the words falling down through him, and Shmendrik was more than just a man; he was a

wizard, one of the few true wizards that remained in this world, and he was a wizard that had seen (and spoken to!) a unicorn, once upon a time.

"You are a Writer," he told Fakir, unsurprised at the lack of surprise Fakir showed when he suddenly spoke. He kept on writing, not saying a thing until he had placed the last word that had asked to be put before he could pause. His eyes looked old when he looked at him, so very old.

"I am a Writer," he agreed.

Shmendrik looked at Duck, still weaving her way through the water, more poise in her than any water fowl he had ever seen, and the memory of lady Amalthea came upon him with a sweet caress of sorrow.

"And Duck?"

"She's a duck," Fakir answered, but then his eyes turned to look at her, and his eyes were wistful and worn and yearning, the eyes Shmendrik had seen so many times in Lir's face. "But once upon a time she was a girl, and once upon a time she was a princess, and once upon a time she was all three in one."

"Is it a curse?" Shmendrik asked, though he knew the answer already, for he would have felt it, if there had been a curse surrounding Duck, the itch of it would have called for him, instead of simply the faint call of magic and words.

"No. It's the unexpected result of a Writer who didn't care. She used to dance like a feather, and she was more delicate than the touch of moonlight upon a rose petal." Fakir muttered, pain and wonder in his voice. "And she gave all that for the sake of a prince." Fakir said, but offered no further explanation, and Shmendrik didn't ask.

Writers, as a whole, were not considered wizards, but it was, simply, a matter of syntaxis carefully applied by the same Writers themselves. Writers believed in magic in the same way legends

believe themselves to be real: it's something that happens but unexplainable and unattainable, and especially magic is something that would never happen to them. Instead they write about others with magic, and they longingly think about how much they would like to have magic, never knowing how close they were from their words becoming Words.

"You have Words," Shmendrik said, understanding and wonder in his voice. "That's what you have inside you. It's almost magic."

"And the 'almost' is all the difference. These aren't my Words. This isn't my story. I write other people stories, always trying to give them their happy ending but sometimes people don't want happy endings. Sometimes they want tragedy and I hate when I have to write that, but I do because they're not my Words to forbid them the right to exist." Fakir said, his eyes sad and distant on the little white duck that danced upon the water with only moonlight by her side.

"Wizards create their Words. Even if they are Words that someone else has used, they break through the flow of narration and then there are Words. A Writer can't do that. A Writer just exists as a way for the Words to go through them and to the ears and eyes of people. And so I keep on searching for my story."

We're not so different, Shmendrik thought, but he didn't say that out loud. Writers, he knew, were egocentric creatures, and they liked to think that no other creature could understand them the way they alone could. Every now and then, a Writer would allow one other creature inside the small circle of their ego and themselves, and that would be it.

It so happened that this young Writer had allowed a duck inside.

"What about her story?" Shmendrik asked. Surely it had to exist, if it had been there to help a prince, quite possibly prince Siegfried, Shmendrik thought.

Fakir didn't smile but there was a softness on the corners of his mouth.

"I found it once," he said. "And with that, Mytho and Rue managed to defeat the Raven, because Duck gifted them her hope, and it still shines within them and within her. After that, I've not found it again. Perhaps her story is over like this, she staying as a duck until she is no more."

"Every story has an ending," Shmendrik agreed. "It's what makes them memorable. If a story never ends, then no-one would get to know it. "

"She's my happy ending," Fakir whispered. "No matter what. She knows I won't go against any story, not even for her."

Shmendrik thought about Lir refusing to marry, at the way he had made his coat of arms a unicorn, the way he never asked but always wondered about the one unicorn who had been mortal as well, and he shook his head.

"The story I know is already over," Shmendrik started, rubbing the back of his neck, his eyes still on Duck. "But it might give you a lead."

"A lead?"

"To your own story. Or hers. Or both. Or neither. That's the thing with unicorns, really."

"Unicorns?!"

So the wizard nodded, took a deep breath, knowing that soon Molly would come to interrupt him (and add to the story herself) he started:

"The unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone…"

Duck and Molly hugged, or as close as a little duck could get to hugging without the aid of arms, but she rubbed her head against Molly's cheek, quacking as if they had been friends for a long time, instead of only knowing each other for a day or two. She also quacked at him, and Shmendrik wondered just how much she knew of what he and Fakir had talked about for most of the night.

She was probably going to learn the whole story sooner rather than later, he thought, if she was anything like Molly, and if Fakir was the kind of man that Shmendrik thought he was.

"Be careful," Shmendrik said, nodding towards the sword resting by Fakir's hip.

The young man shrugged.

"I have no right to use a knight's sword," he answered, and Duck rolled her eyes again, this apparently being something she had heard before. "But my tutor is old and superstitious, and he wants us to be safe. Men fear more a sword than they do a pen."

"Pity, that," Shmendrik said and that was the last of their goodbyes. Fakir shouldered their bags before he let Duck climb on top of it, and Duck quaked their goodbyes until they were too far away to hear or say anything else.

"Do you think she'll turn into a human again?" Molly asked, concerned. "Should I even wish for her to become a human? When *she* turned into Amalthea, it almost killed her."

"But ducks aren't unicorns," Shmendrik said, just a tad wistful. "They are very aware that they will die and that they do not belong in legends and tales of glory. Most ducks, I think, are happy the way they are."

"So she's happy?"

"But most ducks," Shmendrik continued. "Have never been human before, and I don't think many ducks have been in love with a

Writer, either. Most of them have more common sense than that."

"So will he turn her into a human?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps yes, perhaps not. They both have to choose, but they are not aware yet. And perhaps Writers and Wizards are different, after all. Most wizards spend their lives, let them be long or short, avoiding as many consequences as they can, while Writers like to carry theirs on their back."

Molly sighed, thoughtful and sad and perhaps even hopeful, as they both kept on down their road, away from a man that wasn't a knight and a bird that wasn't a princess. And Shmendrik thought about Fakir and his Duck, and briefly hoped for the ending they both deserved, let it be happy or not.

That was, he thought, the least and better thing anyone could hope for.